

Special Report:
Fire Department Culture and Operations

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City Internal Auditor's Office
City of College Station

Fire Department Culture and Operations

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Executive Summary: Fire Department Culture and Operations

Why We Did this Report

A performance audit of the Fire Department was included in the fiscal year 2020 audit plan based on direction given by the Audit Committee. Critical staff turnover, unplanned audit investigations, and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have all led to disruptions in the audit process.

To better facilitate the dissemination of audit results and improve the timeliness of reporting, the Audit Committee amended the audit plan in June 2020 to include multiple smaller-scope Fire Department related audit reports rather than one large report. This is the third and final report in a series of Fire Department related reports.

During our examination of the Fire Department's culture and operations, the Internal Audit Office identified several risks which warranted further examination. Considering audit fieldwork began in September 2019, delivering this report in the timeliest fashion possible was determined to be a priority. Given limited audit resources, however, providing this information in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS) was not feasible.

Although the *Fire Department Culture and Operations* report is not an audit that meets all the requirements of GAGAS, it is still meant to provide information to improve public accountability and facilitate decision-making by (1) identifying the concerns voiced by firefighters, (2) offering limited auditor review of these issues, and (3) providing management with opportunities to respond to these concerns.

Report Summary

The City Auditor's Office observed and attempted to verify the concerns raised within the Fire Department from focus groups, observations, and documentation reviews. In total, audit staff spent over 300 hours observing operations and speaking with firefighters.

This project has been in progress for more than a year. During this time, a new Fire Chief was hired, and new administrative staff were assigned. The City Auditor has been informed by management of changes made to alleviate many of the concerns identified in this report. In addition, observations of fire operations occurred in September 2019. Focus group interviews were conducted from January to March 2020. Conditions and concerns provided during these time periods may have since been addressed.

At the time of our fieldwork, firefighters described a culture which led to a general distrust of department administration staff, seclusion within the department, and disinterest among some firefighters in furthering their career with the City. Much of the negative environment within the culture plays into the efficiency and effectiveness of operations. This report summarizes the concerns and potential solutions identified by firefighters.

The City Auditor's Office has summarized these discussions, observations, and verified concerns (when feasible) to identify opportunities for potential improvements in the Fire Department.

Management provided a response to each concern summarized in this report. Within these responses, management addressed how the issue had already been resolved or their plan for addressing the concern.

Introduction

A performance audit of the Fire Department was included in the fiscal year 2020 audit plan based on direction given by the Audit Committee. Critical staff turnover, unplanned audit investigations, and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have all led to disruptions in the audit process. Therefore, to better facilitate the dissemination of audit results and improve the timeliness of reporting, the Audit Committee amended the audit plan in June 2020 to include multiple smaller-scope Fire Department related audit reports rather than one large report. In September 2020, the first audit in this three-part series was released to the public – *Fire Operations Audit: Relationship with Texas A&M University*. The second audit – *Emergency Medical Services Billing and Revenue Collection* – was completed in January 2021 and is planned to be presented to the Audit Committee in April 2021. The third and final report is provided here – *Fire Department Culture and Operations* – completed February 1, 2021. In May 2017, the Internal Audit Office also published a performance audit of the Fire Prevention Division.

During the Fire Department audit work, the Internal Audit Office identified several risks which warranted further examination. Considering our fieldwork began in September 2019, the City Internal Auditor met with the City Council, the City Manager, and the Fire Chief in December 2020 to discuss how to provide additional critical information into the hands of management in the timeliest fashion possible given the unusual circumstances of 2020. Consequently, it was determined that completion of all Fire Department related audit work, according to Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS), coupled with the audit resources dictated by the Internal Audit Office’s budget, would require a revised time schedule. Thus, we jointly decided to prepare and provide the audit into three phases as listed above.

Although this third report, *Fire Department Culture and Operations*, is not an audit that meets all the requirements of GAGAS, it is still meant to provide information to improve public accountability and facilitate decision-making by (1) identifying the concerns voiced by firefighters, (2) offering limited auditor review of these issues, and (3) providing management with opportunities to respond to these concerns.

Methodology

- **Observations:** Each staff member from the City Auditor’s Office was assigned to observe a fire station for a 24-hour shift. There were no repeated days of the week, and each station was observed once – except for Station 6, which was observed twice. During these observations, audit staff attended every call possible, observed and documented operations, and collected pertinent information from Fire Department personnel.
- **Focus Groups:** The City Auditor’s Office conducted 19 focus groups, with 90 percent of all Fire Department personnel present. These focus groups created an environment where participants could share their honest concerns, opinions, and suggestions. Fire Department staff were asked to place topics on a risk matrix and assign level of probability and impact. The City Auditor’s Office prepared questions and topics for each discussion, leaving commentary to Fire Department personnel.

- **Documentation Reviews:** To verify concerns and suggestions raised by firefighters, we reviewed Fire Department policies and procedures, the Center of Public Safety Management (CPSM) report, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, budget and other fiscal records, inter-local agreements, emergency response data, compensation and benefits benchmarking data, and emergency management professional literature.

Report Limitations

- This report does not meet GAGAS requirements for developing sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence to meet audit objectives. Therefore, the City Auditor's Office offers comments, but does not make any direct audit recommendations to management in this report.
- This project has been in progress for more than a year. During this time, a new Fire Chief was hired, and new administrative staff were assigned. The City Auditor has been informed by management of changes made to alleviate many of the concerns identified in this report. However, this report may offer additional information useful to the new Fire Chief and his staff.
- Observations of fire operations occurred in September 2019. Focus group interviews were conducted from January to March 2020. Conditions and concerns provided during these time periods may have since been addressed.
- Concerns summarized in this report are largely from the perspective of line firefighters. Likewise, the suggestions offered by firefighters are the expressed opinions of the firefighters who offered them and should not be regarded as the opinions of the City Auditor's Office – nor the opinions of all firefighters.
- When information was obtainable, the City Auditor's Office sought to verify concerns and suggestions raised by firefighters. These are provided in the Auditor's Comments following each of the Firefighters' suggestions. However, these comments were somewhat limited in scope due to resource constraints. Therefore, many of the claims made by firefighters could not be independently substantiated by the City Auditor's Office.

Summary

The City Auditor's Office observed and attempted to verify the concerns raised within the Fire Department from focus groups, observations, and documentation reviews as defined below:

City of College Station Fire Department (CSFD) culture: During focus groups, firefighters generally agreed the Fire Department has never had "lower morale" due to a "a culture of fear." The effects of this culture include an increase in resignations, distrust within the administration, seclusion within CSFD, and disinterest in furthering their career with the City.

CFSD operations: Much of the negative environment within the culture plays into the efficiency and effectiveness of operations. This report summarizes the concerns and potential solutions identified by firefighters. The City Auditor's Office has summarized these discussions, observations, and verified concerns within the scope of this report.

The content of this report reflects insight gained through focus group discussions, auditor observations, and documentary review. This report addresses potential opportunities for improvement in the following areas:

- Leadership/Administration
- Cronyism/Nepotism
- Departmental Division
- Compensation
- Turnover
- Leave/Overtime
- Paramedic Shortage
- Apparatus Staffing
- Physical Health
- Workload Efficiency
- Auto Aid with Bryan
- Recruiting
- Promotion
- Training/Certifications
- Special Programs

It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive list of all issues that were raised by firefighters. Instead, they were those most frequently brought to our attention or those with the greatest impact to the Department.

Leadership/Administration

Firefighter Concerns: Many factors were brought to the auditors' attention regarding poor leadership within CSFD such as inconsistent communication, insufficient pay and benefits, ineffective recruitment and retention, lack of accountability, inadequate career development, and inappropriate hiring and promoting of staff.

Line firefighters expressed being frequently dismissed when offering suggestions to CSFD administration. In addition, some firefighters alleged their supervisors were "playing favorites" regarding promotions and assignments. Firefighters also claimed that executive personnel lacked the necessary qualifications and experience to be in leadership positions. Several firefighters spoke of coworkers with exceptional leadership characteristics being

passed up for promotion for those who exhibited poor leadership qualities. These frustrations – allegedly resulting from poor leadership – have led to a lack of trust between firefighters and CSFD administration.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Lack of trust was identified as the key cause of discontent between firefighters and CSFD leadership. Many felt a change in CSFD leadership was needed. Some referenced their satisfaction with previous CSFD administrations. Specifically, some firefighters felt previous administrative personnel better understood their concerns without fear of retaliation. It was also mentioned that previous fire chiefs and assistant chiefs would visit crews at stations more frequently and made efforts to get to know individual firefighters. Most firefighters suggested that leadership needs to consistently communicate and enforce policies and procedures. It was also said that the position of Fire Chief should “understand the political landscape” of the Department.

Auditor Comments: We did not observe any fire administration personnel visiting fire stations. Overall, we found that firefighters tend to favor leadership who support and advocate for the perceived needs of the department. Firefighters have experienced instances when leadership underdelivered on their requests. There appeared to be a lack of communication down the chain of command to effectively explain why specific firefighters’ concerns were not addressed.

Management Response: As indicated in the Report Limitations, the observations that serve as the basis for this report are 18 months old, and much has changed within the department since this information was collected. This information would have been most useful approximately a year ago during new leadership transition. However, new leadership is now in position and actively addressing many of the concerns that arise in this report. A lack of trust was certainly a past concern, and it is being addressed through open communications throughout the department. The new Fire Chief visited each fire station on each shift within the first 30 days in office and received input from field personnel. A strategic vision was shared that focused on 1) Firefighter Safety, 2) Customer Service, and 3) Fiscal Responsibility during each station visit. Changes in the organizational structure have taken place. A comprehensive Assistant Chief selection process was conducted, and two highly qualified new Assistant Chiefs were chosen to serve on the Command Staff. The Command Staff is committed to being accessible, visible, and approachable to the members of the department.

Cronyism/Nepotism

Firefighter Concerns: Firefighters expressed concern over the lack of consistency as to whom the rules apply. While some employees recruited their friends and family into the Department, others were forbidden to do the same. This “pick-and-choose” mentality by CSFD administration has led to frustration and job dissatisfaction amongst firefighters.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Policies and procedures should be consistently applied to all CSFD personnel. Most firefighters who spoke on this topic seemed to indicate that the most qualified applicants should be recruited and hired instead of giving any preference to friends

or family. A few firefighters suggested CSFD should allow family members of firefighters be hired if they are the best qualified and the practice is consistently applied throughout the department.

Auditor Comments: We were unable to verify within the scope of this report if cronyism or nepotism was a significant issue within CFSD. However, we did find that nepotism is more common in fire departments than in other municipal departments. Negative impacts of cronyism and nepotism could include, but are not limited to, decreased performance and productivity, job stress and dissatisfaction, and increased turnover and costs to the organization.

Management Response: Management agrees that the highest qualified candidates should be selected for both initial hiring and advancement within the organization. The most qualified candidates are those with a professional balance of education, certification, and experience. This was the focus of the most recent Assistant Chief selection process. The current administration is committed to consistent application of policy to avoid perceptions of favoritism.

The fire service is a profession rich in history and tradition. One such tradition is multiple family generations serving their community within the fire service. In fact, a strong argument can be made that some of the best candidates are those that come from a long family tradition of public safety through the fire service. The 9/11 Memorial in New York serves as a reminder of the impact of that fateful day on multiple generations of many families. However, the City of College Station has a strict nepotism policy that is rigorously enforced. As a result, many of our own members have adult children who are serving with other fire departments, who would otherwise be highly qualified candidates serving our own local community. They have followed in their parent's footsteps but are prevented from doing so within this organization. These type policies are not as rigorously enforced in larger departments, since they have greater flexibility in avoiding supervision of family members.

Departmental Division

Firefighter Concerns: Most firefighters felt crews at each station worked well together when responding to an emergency. However, some cultural differences existed amongst firefighters at different stations or shifts. There were also concerns related to city employees of other departments not understanding the operational demands of the Fire Department. For example, City policies are sometimes designed without taking into consideration the unique nature by which CSFD is operated and staffed.

Firefighter Suggestions(s): Some CSFD leadership favored rotating personnel between fire stations – especially for new recruits. Other leaders expressed a preference for consistent crews. Stations could keep in touch via video conferencing and regular in-person appearances by the Fire Chief, Assistant Chiefs, and Battalion Chiefs to ensure consistent communication. Some firefighters were critical of the effectiveness of videoconferencing. Other solutions included having picnics, hosting holiday parties, or holding other special events.

Auditor Comments: When we observed the operations of the Fire Department, there was a high degree of cooperation, coordination, and consideration toward citizens and other City employees. However, in our conversations with firefighters, there appears to be some misunderstanding regarding how all City departments work together to provide services to College Station citizens. This perception results in difficulty for some firefighters to consider the operations of other departments as well as how all City departments are interconnected. This could be due to the unique organizational structure of fire departments. Not only is each station somewhat secluded from other City facilities, but staff also work on shift schedules unique from other City employees.

Management Response: Each fire station is a highly trained, highly effective team of dedicated professionals. As such, it is common for a sense of esprit de corps to develop among the station personnel. This is generally encouraged as long as it aligns with the overall goals and objectives of the department. The administration has revised the Transfer/Swap Request Policy (100.06.00) to favor a seniority-based system. In addition, there are inherent increases in safety through crew consistency and continuity. Personnel who constantly work together, train together, and encountered unique challenges together will have an increased awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the team and creates a positive synergistic effect.

It is also not uncommon for there to be some lack of understanding between the fire service and other departments within the City. Typically, other departments work a traditional 40-hour, 5-day workweek and the fire service works a 56-hour, 24/48 schedule. The fire service is also one of the only departments that has required daily minimum staffing which is the industry standard to maintain adequate response capability.

As previously discussed, the current administration is committed to being accessible, visible and approachable to minimize the divisions between line and staff personnel within the department. Various communication methods are being used to keep the two-way flow of information within the organization.

Compensation

Firefighter Concerns: Most firefighters believe they are being compensated well below other fire departments or ambulance services. They also claim their pay is too low to afford College Station's high cost of living; therefore, they need to work second jobs or live outside city limits. We were also told other municipal fire departments offer higher top-end salaries per position with a greater number of pay-step increases. In this way, firefighters are compensated for their experiences instead of needing to be promoted to earn higher wages.

Firefighters were also critical of the methodology used to conduct the salary survey produced by the Human Resources Department, citing salary comparisons produced internally by CSFD firefighters or those done by the Firefighters Association.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Some firefighters suggested reallocating funds internally and externally to meet the perceived needs of the department. Others suggested finding

additional sources of revenue or potentially raising taxes to fund these increases. Some firefighters shifted the blame of their perceived inadequate compensation to CSFD leadership. These firefighters claimed that if CSFD leadership did not engage in wasteful spending and poor planning, there would be sufficient funding to increase pay and benefits. Examples of careless spending included non-useful trainings, excessive equipment acquisitions, and purchasing “shiny” new vehicles with “all the bells and whistles” – citing that not only are these apparatus enhancement and modification procurements wasteful, but they have also led to increased maintenance costs. Therefore, firefighters suggested CSFD administration seek and seriously consider their input prior to making significant purchases.

Auditor Comments: The base compensation for CSFD firefighters ranges between \$52,400 and \$65,900, with a midpoint of \$58,500. The base compensation for CSFD apparatus operators is between \$69,200 and \$76,600. Captains’ base wages range from \$80,400 to \$95,600. Firefighters also have opportunities for additional income such as certification pay, overtime, and shift schedules, which more easily allow them to work second jobs.

We examined firefighter pay schedules, collective bargaining agreements, compensation and benefits documentation, job postings, and employment requirements of every Texas city with a population of more than 50,000. For approximately a year, we also tracked job openings at fire departments across the state posted on the Texas Commission on Fire Protection webpage. We found that firefighter compensation and benefits varied widely across the state. Generally, the departments which offered better compensation and benefits had fewer job openings and more stringent requirements as a condition of employment. Although CSFD wages and benefits are not amongst the highest in the state, they are competitive with some of the higher-paying departments. CSFD compensation and benefits are also competitive with most departments within a 90-mile radius of College Station.

Management Response: It is management’s desire for CSFD to be a destination department and not a steppingstone to another, higher paid department. Since a Firefighter/Paramedic certification is applicable to any department within the state, and since today’s younger generation of workers are more mobile and transient, CSFD must remain competitive, not within just a 90-mile radius, but within all of the State of Texas. While our starting salary is within the range of other departments for Firefighter/EMTs, the biggest gap is among those with paramedic certification. There is a greater demand for Firefighter/Paramedics within the state than the current supply. The COVID impact of the previous year has increased this demand and continued to reduce the supply as training programs have been unable to secure the required clinical hours with EMS agencies and hospitals to allow for paramedic completion. The department administration is an advocate for working with CMO to identify funding to increase paramedic compensation for those assigned to the EMS transport units doing the majority of the paramedic level care.

Turnover

Firefighter Concerns: The frequent turnover of the Fire Chief and City Manager positions led to implementing new policies and “playing catch-up.” Firefighters stated they were left

confused by which policies were still in effect and which policies had been updated or removed with each administrative change. There were also concerns of firefighters who have less than five years of employment with CSFD and more experienced firefighters leaving due to low morale. Experienced staff have retired or left earlier than they otherwise would have. CSFD personnel want to keep turnover low – as they see the loss of a seasoned firefighter as losing years of experience, and the loss of a newer firefighter as being a poor investment.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): The most common solution suggested was to increase both salaries and benefits. Improvements to leadership within the department were also often cited as a way to reduce turnover. There were some firefighters who felt the City should fully pay for the educational cost of certifications – including those historically required for employment with CSFD such as firefighter basic, EMT basic, and paramedic certifications. However, if the City funds these educational requirements, some firefighters felt the City should be repaid if those who received this benefit left the City shortly after receiving their credentials.

Auditor Comments: CSFD's average annual turnover rate from 2006 to 2013 was three percent compared to seven percent from 2014 to 2020.¹ We found conflicting data regarding national turnover rates for firefighters. Therefore, within the scope of this report, we do not offer an opinion on what is considered an acceptable turnover rate for fire department employees.

CSFD firefighters tend to have longer tenures and lower turnover than most other City employees. One reason for this is due to how most fire departments in Texas recruit, train, and promote from within. As a result, there are few positions available at other fire departments for higher-rank firefighters. Therefore, once a CSFD firefighter has been promoted from firefighter-basic to a higher rank, transferring to another fire department typically results in less starting pay and a lower rank.

Management Response: Management agrees with the Firefighter concerns regarding turnover. The department has hired 24 new members in the past year which is 15% of the classified members. Of these, 6 positions were newly created positions as a result of a SAFER grant, and 18 were the result of attrition, which yields a turnover rate of 12%. Most of the turnover was in members with less than 5 years of service who were leaving for another department. There are expenses associated with the recruiting and hiring process, but the loss of experienced members that the City has invested additional training in results in an even greater loss. For example, the department has currently submitted a federal grant request through the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program for paramedic training and has identified those costs to be approximately \$58,000 per individual. Turnover of these members early in their career to another department represents a tremendous loss of training, experience, and financial resources. Management disagrees that members should be compensated for Firefighter/EMT certification as these are prerequisites for employment in the fire service. However, paramedic certification should be compensated with a financial sign-on bonus for new hires. The department should find mechanisms to pay for education costs when sending members within the department for paramedic training such as the aforementioned AFG grant.

¹ Turnover from 2006 to 2013 was compared to that from 2014 to 2020 to examine difference in department leadership.

Leave/Overtime

Firefighter Concerns: Apparatuses are typically not taken out of service anytime a shift drops below minimum staffing levels due to sick leave usage, off-roster training, or other factors. Instead, firefighters who work outside their normally scheduled shifts are paid overtime.

As the number of apparatuses have increased, the minimum personnel required to staff those apparatuses has also increased. At the same time, total departmental staffing has not increased at an adequate rate, resulting in a shortage of reserve staff per shift to meet minimum staffing requirements. Therefore, there are fewer days available for each firefighter to request vacation leave; especially on days most in demand, such as those surrounding holidays. Compounding this issue, many firefighters expressed dissatisfaction with how CSFD handles scheduling and shift trades. Consequently, firefighters stated they often use sick leave when they are unable to schedule vacation leave or unable to trade a shift with another firefighter.

CSFD procedures appear to be constructed to allow for more even distribution of overtime hours among staff. However, this does not work in practice because few fighters volunteer to work overtime due to conflicts with their secondary employment. As a result, most overtime is worked by only a few individuals. Some firefighters suggested that more individuals would sign up to work overtime shifts if they could be guaranteed overtime. In other words, secondary employment is a more desirable option because it is a more reliable source of additional income.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): The most common suggestion to reduce overtime was to increase total staffing. Firefighter position vacancies also result in lower total staffing. Therefore, increasing the frequency of recruitment and hiring could also result in lower overtime costs. Alternatively, some firefighters suggested keeping total staffing at their current levels or even decreasing them to provide greater access to overtime to additional staff. If staffing levels are not increased, the CSFD's overtime budget should be increased to better reflect the likely amount of overtime to be used.

Auditor Comments: Through an examination of payroll records, we were able to confirm that most overtime was granted to a select few of CSFD employees. In addition, we were able to determine that those employees primarily consisted of higher-income earners within the department. More overtime pay has been granted to CSFD firefighters than any other group of employees in the City – which is primarily due to minimum daily staffing requirements. We did not determine within the scope of this report what portion of CSFD's overtime costs was funded by outside agencies. We also compared the City's Employee Handbook to CSFD's policies and procedures regarding sick leave, and there appears to be no contradictions. The policy states that sick leave may be taken for sickness, injury, or doctor appointments that may prevent an employee's performance of duty when a family member is ill.

Management Response: Identifying and maintaining the correct Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) count is critical for every fire department. The fire service is one of the only

departments that requires a constant minimum staffing level to maintain response capability. Determining the correct FTE count depends on accurately determining the staffing factor which varies based on the employee benefits and seniority of the members. Currently, the CSFD staffing factor has been determined to be 3.6 FTE's per minimum staffed position. Management agrees with the Firefighter concerns that when the FTE count drops, it impacts the ability of members to take earned employee leave. Currently, the department has increased its FTE count to an appropriate level and is committed to maintaining an appropriate FTE count.

Several policies have been recently revised to address some of these concerns. The Overtime Policy (200.04.10) allows members to sign up for overtime availability and be assigned when staffing levels fall below minimum staffing based on rank opening and least hours worked to more evenly distribute overtime potential among members. The Exchange of Hours Policy (100.06.20) has also been revised to address the substitution process. Additionally, the Shift Personnel Attendance and Leave Policy (300.18.02) was revised to reflect an increase in vacation and holiday accruals and the appropriate scheduling of leave time.

Finally, the department provides additional reimbursable services beyond the core services to the community. These include deployments through TIFMAS, TxTF-1, and EMTF-7 which are state reimbursable. The department will continue to monitor and evaluate the reimbursement challenges with these programs and determine the impact on future participation.

Paramedic Shortages

Firefighter Concerns: Although there doesn't seem to be a shortage of CSFD personnel who are certified paramedics, there does seem to be a growing shortage of CSFD certified paramedics who are willing or able to serve as paramedics on ambulances. Seasoned firefighters with paramedic certifications said they do not feel confident riding the ambulance and administering patient care because many have not done so in years. In addition, some seasoned firefighters indicated they should not be assigned to the ambulance due to their seniority within CSFD. Some firefighters stated they had been assigned to the ambulance as a form of punishment.

Many firefighters agreed that the demands of a paramedic working on an ambulance is significantly higher than other assignments. Paramedics are held to a high standard of accountability for patient care. As a result, some felt unfairly dealt with when mistakes were made.

The City does not require firefighters become paramedics as a condition of employment or promotion. In addition, many felt that paramedic certification pay is too low to provide an adequate incentive to obtain the certification. Therefore, some felt the only incentive to becoming a paramedic is to be more marketable to obtain a job at a higher-paying fire department.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): The skills and attributes to be an effective paramedic do not necessarily translate to those that make an effective firefighter. Therefore, while some firefighters feel it should be a requirement for all CSFD operational staff to be paramedics, other firefighters disagreed. However, many firefighters suggested that paramedic certification should be a requirement for promotion because CSFD leaders should thoroughly understand the positions they supervise.

A common suggestion was to provide an incentive for firefighters to want to work on the ambulance by offering substantive ambulance assignment pay. Some disagreed with this solution because it would attract those less suitable to function as paramedics to request ambulance assignment for the sole purpose of increased compensation. To mitigate this risk, some advocated for the implementation of a paramedic/EMT promotional track separate from the typical firefighter career progression.

Other solutions included increasing paramedic certification pay, funding firefighters' paramedic education, partnering with paramedic training programs to assist in recruitment efforts, and developing succession and career progression plans to better anticipate current and future needs.

Auditor Comments: On average, ambulances were deployed 15 percent of the time during each 24-hour shift compared to 5 percent for engines, and 2 percent for ladder trucks. We also observed that the daily operational demands of those assigned to an ambulance crew appear to be significantly greater in terms of stress, workload, and required expertise. Based on our observations, the average tenure of a firefighter is 3.4 years on an ambulance, 10.2 years on an engine, and 8 years on a ladder truck. Due to this gap in tenure, these ambulance crews receive on average 20 percent less in base compensation than firefighters staffed on other apparatuses.

Management Response: Statistics clearly show that in a Fire/EMS service, the request for EMS service is much higher than for fire service. However, this data does not adequately represent that each fire response requires more personnel and required more manpower hours of labor for each active incident than do most EMS calls. In the City of College Station, 70-80% of the annual requests for service by the College Station Fire Department are EMS related incidents. Further, the CSFD provides an Advanced Life Support (ALS) EMS system which requires paramedic level training and competence. The requirements for ALS-level care not only require a higher level of training and continuing education, but also require a higher level of patient care responsibility, specialized skills, and liability which, compounded with the higher level of call volume, results in greater workload and stress level. Paramedic training and experience does have an additional positive benefit of producing well-rounded professionals who are critical-thinkers and have an increased level of skill at risk-benefit evaluation and critical decision-making capacity which has a positive correlation with leadership ability.

In the State of Texas, there is an apparent supply shortage of dual trained Firefighter/Paramedics. The COVID crisis has enhanced this shortage with the inability of paramedic training programs to have access to hospital and ambulance clinical hours to complete training programs. Then in 2018, the department began hiring Firefighter/EMT's without the mandatory conditional job requirement of becoming a paramedic. In the most recent

round of hiring, a paramedic sign-on bonus was offered as an incentive to attract paramedics but had minimal impact.

The department has recently revised the Professional Development Guide to require paramedic certification as a condition of promotion to encourage members to become trained as paramedics. The department is actively pursuing grant opportunities to assist with funding. The department has created the Paramedic II position as an alternative promotional opportunity for those who desire to promote but remain more actively engaged with EMS rather than fire suppression duties. The administration will work with CMO to identify funding to increase paramedic compensation for those assigned to the EMS transport units doing the majority of the paramedic level care.

Apparatus Staffing

Firefighter Concerns: One of the most common criticisms we heard is that the City is not following National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)² minimum staffing standards for fire engine and ladder companies. According to these standards, engine and ladder companies should be staffed with a minimum of four on-duty members. However, CSFD engine and ladder companies were staffed with three firefighters – with two additional firefighters being assigned to quick response vehicles (QRV).

Assuming a QRV responds on the scene of a structure fire with an engine and ladder, then NFPA minimum staffing requirements would be met. However, firefighters stated that there could be instances when the QRV would not respond with the other apparatuses. Therefore, firefighters generally did not view that CSFD is following these standards.

In 2013, a structure fire in Bryan at the Knights of Columbus building resulted in two fatalities and a few other firefighters severely injured. Several CSFD firefighters told us that these fatalities could have been avoided if Bryan engines and ladder companies were staffed according to NFPA standards. Firefighters believe the City Manager's Office, CSFD leadership, and political leaders have ignored this concern, resulting in them feeling that their wellbeing and safety are being discounted. Therefore, many firefighters expressed that staffing engines and ladders with four firefighters should be CSFD's top priority. Several firefighters told us they would rather see CSFD use resources to implement this change than providing compensation increases for CSFD personnel.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Increase funding to hire additional staff to ensure engine and ladder companies meet NFPA standards. CSFD administration should seek the input of personnel down the chain of command prior to making significant operational decisions. Prior to purchasing and deploying QRVs, the concept should have been tested and firefighter input should have been sought.

² The purpose of the NFPA standards is to specify the minimum criteria addressing the effectiveness and efficiency of the career public fire suppression operations, emergency medical service, and special operations delivery in protecting the citizens of the jurisdiction and the occupational safety and health of fire department employees.

Auditor Comments: It appears to be a strongly held belief amongst many CSFD firefighters that inadequate staffing on engine companies contributed to the firefighter fatalities and injuries suffered at the Knights of Columbus fire. We reviewed the Texas State Fire Marshal's Office report. We also spoke with several CSFD firefighters and leaders individually to ensure we thoroughly understood the findings in this report. Although the report references NFPA standard 1710, which recommends staffing engine companies with four firefighters, the report does not indicate inadequate engine staffing to be a primary cause as to what led to the firefighter fatalities and injuries.

We also reviewed the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) report regarding this incident. The NIOSH report recommends that "fire departments should ensure that appropriate staffing levels are available on scene to accomplish fireground tasks and be available for unexpected emergencies." The NIOSH report also references NFPA standard 1710 and mentions that a staff of three or more has a higher success rate during search and rescue.

Management Response: Administration strongly shares the Firefighter concerns regarding adequate staffing according to NFPA 1710 standards, and currently views this as the departments greatest risk to firefighter safety. The fact that the audit focus groups identified that firefighters place a higher value on four-member staffing rather than compensation increases highlights the importance of this concern among firefighters. The National Institute of Science and Technology (NIST) conducted extensive research on the safest, most effective, and efficient fire suppression crew size. The results definitively supported four-member staffing of engine and ladder companies.

The department administration has developed a Strategic Plan based upon three core principles: 1) Firefighter Safety, 2) Customer Service, and 3) Fiscal Responsibility. Input gathered as a requirement in the CFAI Accreditation process also indicated firefighter safety as the top priority of external stakeholders. CFAI data analysis of the departments past 5 years response data shows that the department would decrease response time of the effective response force (ERF) by 2 minutes 30 seconds in urban areas and 4 minutes 42 seconds in rural areas by increasing staffing to the NFPA 1710 standard while meeting the ERF with less heavy apparatus responding. The department will work with CMO to identify funding for a phased-in plan for the implementation of four-member staffing along with the additional staffing that will be needed for Station 7. The department would recommend the use of SAFER grants to assist in accomplishing this increased staffing.

Current administration fully agrees that the QRV program was ill conceived and a fully funded plan was not implemented. The roll out of the QRV program caused excessive unfunded overtime and more importantly, decreased firefighter safety by loss of crew continuity which could have proven disastrous on a significant incident. This program has been discontinued in its original form.

The Auditor Comments regarding Line of Duty Death (LODD) reports needs to be qualified by a subject matter expert. Generally, there are three LODD investigative reports completed following each LODD, representing the local AHJ investigation, the State investigation, and the Federal level investigation. The NIOSH report represents the federal investigation and is considered the "gold standard" in LODD investigative reports since it is

consistent across jurisdictional boundaries. Rarely, if ever, is a singular factor a primary cause in a LODD. There are typically several contributing factors. Inadequate staffing is most commonly cited as a significant contributing factor in LODD's in departments that do not meet the NFPA 1710 staffing standard. Such was the case in the Knights of Columbus fire.

Physical Health

Firefighter Concerns: There were several firefighters who expressed concern over others' abilities to perform the essential duties of fire rescue due to a lack of physical conditioning. When a firefighter is not physically fit, they put themselves, their crew, and citizens at greater risk of serious harm. Although firefighters receive periodic physical examinations, only as a requirement of employment do firefighters complete a physical fitness test to demonstrate their ability to perform vital fire rescue functions. In addition, several firefighters feel this test is not stringent enough to demonstrate that new recruits can perform essential duties.

In 2019, CSFD developed a program to (1) set departmental standards for physical fitness, (2) annually assess the physical condition of firefighters, and (3) assist those who fell short of meeting the physical fitness standards. The assessment test was based on NFPA standards and designed to simulate the activities of basic tasks a firefighter would have to perform during an incident. Prior to this program being fully implemented, it was disbanded by City Management. Since the decision was made not to move forward with this program, many firefighters felt unsupported by CSFD administration and that the City does not value their health and safety.

There was also evident abuse of the City's tobacco use policy at City fire stations. Breathing capacity is essential to being able to perform the job of a firefighter effectively and safely. Therefore, some firefighters expressed concern that there are a few members of the department who are heavy smokers.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Although the fitness program faced scrutiny from those less physically fit, it was supported by most other firefighters who would like to see it fully implemented. Instead of purchasing more costly gym equipment that goes unused, less expensive equipment suggested by firefighters, such as rowers, should be acquired. Some firefighters suggested CSFD provide uninterrupted workouts while on shift. Some firefighters felt the City's tobacco use policy should be enforced, while others stated CSFD administration would see significant pushback if this were to happen.

Auditor Comments: We were unable to verify within the scope of this report why the CSFD's physical fitness program was disbanded prior to full implementation. We observed very few instances of firefighters engaging in physical fitness exercise and fewer instances of these individuals using CSFD gym equipment. The Employee Handbook states that the City encourages the prevention of tobacco use, and should City employees use tobacco, to do so away from entrances, during approved breaks, away from City-affiliated areas, and not while "conducting City business." We observed multiple instances of this policy being disregarded.

Management Response: Management agrees that firefighter physical and mental health are a priority and are part of the Strategic Plan outlining Firefighter Safety as the top priority. The department has provided annual medical health screening and is in the process of changing this process to use a new vendor to provide enhanced medical, mental and cancer screening capabilities. Previous attempts to develop a mandatory minimum physical fitness standard were placed on hold due to administrative and operational concerns. This program should be revisited with input from all stakeholders and a comprehensive plan developed to ensure all personnel are capable of meeting minimum job requirements. A comprehensive program must be validated with age-scalability and incorporate a plan for rehabilitation and accountability for those who fail to meet the minimum standard. The department has begun voluntary biannual physical fitness testing with decent participation. This program is managed by the departments peer fitness team. The physical fitness exam was revised for the most recent round of new hires with input from the peer fitness team. Management rigorously supports a tobacco-free workforce and has made attempts to develop a no-smoking agreement as a condition of employment for new hires. This still has some work to be done in conjunction with HR and Legal but would be a positive step to eventually create a tobacco-free workforce which will improve firefighters respiratory and cardiovascular health.

Workload Efficiency

Firefighter Concerns: There appeared to be a sentiment that ambulance crews were overworked. Therefore, firefighters expressed frustration that the City has not invested in additional ambulance apparatuses and crews. Firefighters recognized that the majority of the workload in CSFD is handled by ambulance crews. However, few firefighters voiced any concerns about this imbalance in their proposed workload. Fire suppression staff may not spend a large portion of their day responding to incidents, but firefighters feel they should be well compensated because they stand ready to respond to any emergency.

There appears to be an unwritten rule that once a firefighter has accumulated enough years of experience, they should not have to work on ambulance crews. In addition, a few of the more experienced firefighters held the belief that those with seniority should have preference to be stationed on crews which respond to the fewest number of calls. Therefore, these firefighters expressed concerns over any policy changes or station or crew reassignments which would, in essence, increase their workload.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): To better address workload disparities and increase productivity, approximately 64 percent of the staff suggested implementing a 48/96 schedule – at least on a trial basis. Those opposed to this were concerned with how it could interfere with their secondary employment and lead to greater firefighter fatigue and subsequent safety risks.

A few firefighters supported station and crew rotation, but this appeared to be a minority view. One captain said he would like to rotate a crew from an engine to the ambulance when the ambulance crew is especially overworked. However, he stated that this option is usually

not available because engines are generally staffed with three-person crews and he typically doesn't have an extra paramedic on shift that he could place on the ambulance.

Auditor Comments: In a given day, a CSFD ambulance crew makes, on average, six runs and is deployed three-and-a-half hours out of a 24-hour shift. After each run, these crews can spend over an hour completing patient reports and performing ambulance maintenance tasks. A typical engine crew makes three runs a day and is deployed just over an hour in a 24-hour shift. A ladder crew may only make one run a day and is deployed under an hour a day.

We observed that captains try to keep their crews busy in the morning performing maintenance, training, or other assigned duties. After morning duties are completed, most captains allow their crews to have significant downtime when not responding to calls. The rationale provided to us for this approach is that if crews are continuously working throughout the day, then when they are required to respond to a call, they will not be able to perform optimally – especially if they are asked to respond to an emergency late in the evening.

Management Response: There appears to be three concerns within this area: 1) shift schedule, 2) paramedic workload, and 3) personnel assignments. These have been discussed in previous sections to some degree.

The fire service industry standard is a 24-hour shift schedule. This is the most efficient and effective for several reasons, including a singular shift change each day minimizing staffing adjustments and holdover overtime for active incidents. In addition, there is less wear, tear and maintenance on equipment that only goes through operational readiness checks once each day. There are several 3-shift models used by the fire service. The CSFD uses the 24/48 work schedule which equates to a 56-hour workweek. Several studies have been done on various shift schedules and many departments have or are in the process of transitioning to the 48/96 work schedule which has proven to be more efficient and effective. Many departments that have transitioned to the 48/96 have seen significant increases in job satisfaction and find it to be a powerful recruitment and retention benefit. Management is open to evaluate the feasibility of the 48/96 model in the future.

Paramedic workload has been previously discussed; however, an additional component is assuring the right number of paramedics are available in the right ranks to fill the daily staffing requirements for the EMS transport units. To avoid paramedic burnout, it is imperative to have enough paramedics in the ranks of Firefighter and/or Paramedic II positions to allow rotation between the EMS transport units and the fire suppression apparatus. Since CSFD provides ALS first responder service, the rotating paramedics can utilize their ALS skills in either assignment. This requires 19 paramedics in the combined ranks of Firefighter and/or Paramedic II assigned to each shift to assure adequate rotation.

An additional component of the paramedic workload, which is also fundamental to the strategic goal of customer service delivery, is the availability of EMS transport units to respond to emergencies. Data has begun to be tracked that supports the need for a 5th ambulance due to the increasing demand for service. CSFD added a 4th ambulance in 2012 and since that time, the population of the community has grown 27% and the EMS call volume has increased 32%. The amount of time that all four CSFD ambulances are

simultaneously assigned to incidents has grown to a concerning level. During these times, the City of College Station is relying on the potential availability of outside agencies to provide EMS transport. The department has submitted a Service Level Adjustment (SLA) for FY22 to add a 5th ambulance during peak time demand, 5-days per week, 12-hours each day. This would be staffed by overtime with Firefighter/Paramedics and/or Paramedic II members.

The department has recently revised the Transfer Policy (100.06.00) to ensure a more transparent process. The revised process assures all department members are advised of vacant positions and have the opportunity to submit transfer requests to open positions which will be approved based on time-in-rank seniority, qualifications, and organizational needs.

Auto Aid with Bryan

Firefighter Concerns: Due to Station 6's proximity to Bryan and the automatic aid agreement³ between the two cities, CSFD personnel responds to significantly more calls in Bryan than the Bryan Fire Department responds to calls in College Station. Firefighters claimed Bryan is strategically deploying resources further north, leaving it to CSFD to respond to an increasing number of calls to south Bryan residents. In addition, CSFD firefighters said they have witnessed multiple instances where Bryan had the resources to respond to a call, but intentionally took units out of service because they knew CSFD would respond. This most frequently happens with EMS-related incidents or any low acuity call. Most of these Bryan ambulance transports are patients who either don't have insurance or are on Medicare or Medicaid. Therefore, CSFD is likely to recoup very little revenue while incurring substantial costs.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Some firefighters suggested revising the automatic aid agreement with Bryan to a mutual aid agreement. In this way, College Station units would not be dispatched to low acuity calls in the City of Bryan. In addition, many felt great improvement could be achieved if Bryan and College Station were on the same call routing system. A more controversial suggestion was to move Station 6, with the idea of converting the current location into a training facility.

Auditor Comments: After examining the automatic aid agreement and call data, we could verify that CSFD responds to more calls in Bryan than Bryan does in College Station. Roughly 8 percent of CSFD's annual workload is spent responding to incidents in Bryan. Only 5 percent of these calls into Bryan are spent responding to outside or structure fires. The remaining 95 percent are low acuity or EMS-related incidents.

Management Response: As a Brazos Valley community, we have an interest in assuring all citizens of our community have appropriate public safety services. The boundaries between the two cities are often blurred and our citizens work and travel between both jurisdictions, so we have a humanitarian interest in assuring they have access to adequate public safety

³ Automatic aid is assistance dispatched automatically by contractual agreement between two communities or fire districts. This differs from mutual aid or assistance arranged case by case.

throughout the region. Management agrees with the observation and data that clearly shows there is a disproportionate advantage to the automatic aid agreement that favors the City of Bryan. The use of AVL dispatch sends the closest unit to the call, regardless of whether it is a CSFD or BFD unit. Since Station 6 was built literally on the border between the two cities, half of its circumferential response area is within the City of Bryan. This clearly favors the City of Bryan and the current automatic aid agreement provides no incentive for BFD to reallocate resources to cover the south side of their jurisdiction. Data from 2020 shows that in the allocation of automatic aid for ambulance units, 77% of the time a CSFD ambulance was responding to Bryan while only 23% of the time a BFD ambulance was responding to College Station. Furthermore, 2020 data shows that 40% of the ambulance responses from Station 6 were within the City of Bryan. In essence, the City of College Station is subsidizing EMS service for the south side of Bryan. Therefore, management agrees that the automatic aid agreement must be re-evaluated to provide automatic aid on high acuity calls when the closest resource is most critical, but with the expectation that each jurisdiction handle its own lower acuity calls.

Recruiting

Firefighter Concerns: Some firefighters believe the quality of potential candidates has declined due to the lack of effort CSFD puts into recruiting, while others claimed it was due to CSFD's low starting pay in comparison to other fire departments. It was also mentioned that prospective firefighters who do not advance must go through the hiring process again. Additionally, with the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX)⁴ "in our back yard," some firefighters do not think there should be an issue with recruiting a large number of highly qualified candidates due to the volume of potential recruits that attend this fire school.

In addition, firefighters felt the hiring process does not happen frequently enough, resulting in positions being held vacant longer than necessary. Less frequent hiring results in reduced recruitment costs. However, it also means positions are held vacant longer, which are filled by current firefighters. The longer positions are held vacant, more stress is put on the department including, but not limited to, an increased use of overtime. Therefore, these two opposing costs need to be optimally balanced.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): CSFD should focus its recruitment efforts on individuals who are from the local area by developing programs that partner with local high schools and institutes of higher education. This approach could not only bolster candidate pools but also decrease the likelihood of employee turnover. Candidate pools could also be increased through effective advertising efforts at TEEX and surrounding volunteer fire departments.

Firefighters mentioned that incentivized pay or offering signing bonuses for certified paramedics could help attract larger numbers of qualified paramedics. Another suggestion

⁴ The Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) Brayton Fire Training Field offers training in 40 qualifications, with the most reviewed qualifications being hazmat, licensed firefighter I and EMT certifications. Time to complete this training ranges from 3 hours to 5 months depending on the qualification. The cost to attend TEEX Brayton Fire Training Field ranges from \$111 to \$13,000 depending on the qualification.

was to keep a list of those who applied but were not hired to “fast-track” the process if they decided to apply again, decreasing time and costs pertaining to the hiring process.

Auditor Comments: We were unable to verify within the scope of this report if CSFD is receiving sufficient, qualified applicants to timely fill vacant positions. We did, however, observe the hiring process in December 2019. The process consisted of a written and physical test and two interviews. During these observations, we noticed confusion amongst those administering the tests regarding how the physical test was to be conducted. CSFD evaluators debated between hiring the number of firefighters needed versus only hiring those who met all qualification standards.

Management Response: Management agrees that elevating CSFD to a destination department rather than a steppingstone to a higher paid department will result in great numbers and higher quality recruits. As mentioned by the firefighters, recruiting high quality candidates with ties to the local community should be a top consideration to assist in minimizing turnover. For this reason, management disagrees with the concept of heavily recruiting among the TEEX participants since they come from all over the state and in some cases from all over the country for training. A new program is underway at College View High School to provide a specialized program for high school Juniors and Seniors so that they can graduate from high school with the requirements necessary for TCFP and EMT certification. The administration supports this type of program and would like to see it expand. This has the potential to develop local talent to become the next generation of College Station Firefighters.

Management also agrees that vacancies should be filled and not allow the overall FTE count to fall which impacts daily staffing. Past practice has been to begin the process of recruiting and hiring when 4 vacancies became open, however, in the most recent round of hiring there were 7 open positions. It is not feasible to initiate the hiring process for a single opening, but the administration agrees that the process should occur when 3 openings exist and will use that as the future benchmark. It is most advantageous to hire members already certified as Firefighter/Paramedics. During the last round of hiring, a sign-on bonus was implemented for those with paramedic certification but had minimal success. Since there is a much greater demand for Firefighter/Paramedics than current supply, future incentive sign-on bonuses will need to be increased to have an impact. The future will likely continue to require hiring Firefighter/EMT’s as a condition of employment and provide opportunities and incentives for existing members to complete paramedic training to meet the needs of the department.

In response to the auditor comments, this administration is strictly committed to only hiring qualified candidates. If there are not enough qualified candidates to meet available openings, we are committed to repeat the recruiting process rather than bring inadequately qualified candidates into the department.

Promotions

Firefighter Concerns: Although there are examples of excellent captains and battalion chiefs, the best leaders are not always being developed and promoted throughout the

Department. Some of the requirements for promotion do not necessarily correlate to firefighting expertise or leadership. For example, although a promotion to battalion chief requires a certain number of college credits, it does not require a paramedic's certification.

One barrier to promotion for many firefighters are the written aptitude tests. A high percentage of eligible firefighters are not passing these tests. While some firefighters suggested that the results of these tests do not accurately reflect a firefighter's knowledge or expertise in the field, others pointed out that those who fail the test do not study for the exam. Defenders of the aptitude tests also said there needs to be some objective criteria for promotion, and at least the test measures a firefighter's desire to be promoted by putting in the work to study.

There were a few firefighters who remarked that apparatus operator is the best CSFD position. Firefighter to apparatus operator receives a greater percentage jump in pay than other promotions. Firefighters promoted to apparatus operator are also no longer scheduled to work on ambulance crews; therefore, they experience a decrease in workload. Finally, apparatus operators do not have to deal with the responsibilities of supervising other firefighters.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): CSFD will not promote until a firefighter meets all the requirements of promotion. As a result, several firefighters have been assigned to act in higher positions for significant periods of time without actually being promoted. Therefore, some firefighters feel that if these individuals have already demonstrated they can effectively perform the duties of these positions, then they should be promoted into them regardless of their written aptitude test scores. Some firefighters suggested changing the policy requiring a passing score for promotion, to ranking test scores. The test scores could then be used as one factor among many to determine whom to promote.

Auditor Comments: A new policy was in the process of implementation during our observation period. This policy took current Lieutenants and promoted them to Captains to reduce compensation compression. We were told that Safety Officer positions for each shift and station were created to assist on major EMS calls and to ensure all medications administered are recorded correctly. Additionally, a task book must be completed and checked for accuracy by a higher-ranking official. Firefighters must also complete a hands-on test proving they can fulfill the requirements of a higher-ranking official to be promotion eligible.

Management Response: Promoting the most qualified candidate to leadership positions is equally important as hiring the most qualified candidates into the department. The Promotional Requirements and Professional Development Guide was revised in January 2021 that address many of the concerns expressed in this report. Prerequisite promotional requirements were evaluated and revised to include a balance of education, certification, and experience. The promotional process includes an assessment of knowledge, skills, and abilities applicable to the promotional position. Each portion of the promotional process must receive a passing score. These measures are designed to promote the highest qualified candidates.

Training/Certifications

Firefighter Concerns: Although CSFD is saving time and money by tracking and conducting most firefighter training through TargetSolutions⁵, some firefighters said they wished their work was more focused on saving lives than on paperwork and certifications. There were also objections that some trainings were more intensive than other trainings, and that it was “horrible, lengthy, and overwhelming.” Frustrations were expressed regarding certifications that are not specific to the basic duties of positional assignments that are being obtained at the expense of firefighters. Several firefighters also said their certifications were not helpful because they were not able to utilize them, and they would have to pay an additional cost once their existing certifications expire.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Several firefighters felt there should be a heavier focus on fire prevention and more frequent and impactful hands-on Fire and EMS training. One captain told us that he used to be able to tailor hands-on training at the station to the needs of his crew. Although this could lead to inconsistency amongst crews, he felt this type of training was much more effective than the online training CSFD requires now. Some firefighters suggested CSFD pay for the certification, training, and overtime of all job-related certifications (regardless of assignment requirements) because they can lead to promotional opportunities and enhance the overall knowledge and effectiveness of emergency response.

Auditor Comments: We were able to observe some aspects of a BlueCard⁶ training program which was slowly being phased in at the time of our review. We observed some firefighters were not fully focused on the training because the online training was not interactive.

Management Response: Firefighters in general are hand-on learners. Historically, nearly all fire service training focused on hands-on skills. Modern day learning options include online learning opportunities to enhance training and education. Management agrees there needs to be a delicate balance between hands-on practical training and online independent learning. Blue Card Incident Command is an example of a program that encompasses both online learning and hands-on practical application. The department has additional hands-on training such as Handtevy and annual live fire training at TEEX. The department is working toward additional hands-on EMS training courses such as ACLS and BTLIS. Administration is also planning for other hands-on courses such as Active Attack Integrated Response (AAIR) and Fireground Survival. However, online learning will continue to have a place in the overall training plan. Online learning has several advantages such as minimizing the impact on out of service time, flexibility in completing training, and reduced overtime impact. For these reasons, online learning will continue to be used for TCFP and EMS re-certification requirements.

⁵ TargetSolutions provides accredited online training courses and real-time record-keeping software applications to fire and EMS organizations. TargetSolutions features more than 450 hours of training for fire departments, including 250 hours of Fire & EMS continuing education.

⁶ BlueCard is an incident commander certification program which instructs on the standards and best practices for strategic and tactical emergency operations.

Special Programs

Firefighter Concerns: CSFD consists of many teams and special programs. Some felt that the focus on so many special programs came at a cost of taking resources away from core services. The programs firefighters generally found the most value to CSFD were honor guard, bike, hazardous material, airport rescue and firefighting (ARFF), and technical rescue teams. The programs cited as being the least beneficial to the City were swift boat rescue, Texas Intrastate Fire Mutual Aid System (TIFMAS), and the wildland fire team.

Although some of these special programs receive outside funding, firefighters claimed outside funding does not cover the full cost of these programs. In addition, when firefighters are deployed to serve in these programs or need training related to these programs, undue stress is put on the Department.

Firefighter Suggestion(s): Although most firefighters believed CSFD should reduce the number of special programs, there was disagreement amongst firefighters as to which special programs were the most useful. The City should ensure special programs are fully funded by the entities that benefit from them, and any program not fully funded should be removed as a service. For example, firefighters felt that the Police Department should fully fund all the costs associated with firefighters who serve on the special weapons and tactical (SWAT) team, and Easterwood Airport should fully fund the ARFF program.

Auditor Comments: We found that firefighters who were members of certain special programs saw merit and value within those programs, while those who were not involved viewed the programs as less beneficial.

Management Response: The fire service as a whole is being pulled in many different directions. Much of this can be attributed to the adaptability, flexibility, and capability found in fire service professionals. This department has had a history of beginning programs that were popular at the moment, but with no long-term sustainability plan. Examples of this include the department dive team and the implementation of the Quick Response Vehicles. This administration is committed to special programs that are aligned with the core mission and strategic plan of the department. These programs should be specifically tied to improvements in firefighter safety, customer service, and fiscal responsibility and have a benefit to the citizens of College Station with input from members of the field who will be implementing these programs. It is much preferred to be experts in a few core special programs than mediocre in several unfunded programs. The administration is currently evaluating and updating participation in some of these programs.

The ARFF agreement was recently revised and updated to now cover all department expenses. An internal policy has been established regarding deployment of TIFMAS, TxTF-1, and EMTF-7 resources that are tied to timely reimbursements. This policy requires reimbursement for deployments within 45 days, or these teams will be taken out of eligibility for future deployment until reimbursement is received. This is designed to keep the department from building a large debt that must be absorbed within the current budget. The department is committed to fully supporting the Tac-Medic program to assure the best of

medical care is available to CSPD. Administration has been working with CSPD and CMO to assure the costs associated are being appropriately budgeted.

It is important to also recognize that special programs have several advantages. First, specialized programs that are available within a department are powerful recruiting and retention tools. Another advantage is that participation in these activities provides our members with a variety of practical experience that can be brought back to this community and this department. Finally, participation in regional and state deployments shows the professionalism of the College Station Fire Department and its willingness to be part of “Texans helping Texans” programs. These are valuable reasons to continue to carefully consider participation in these opportunities as long as they can be financially and logistically supported.

Conclusion

The City Audit Office spent over 300 hours observing operations and speaking with firefighters. We are extremely thankful for the time these individuals spent with us. Overall, the firefighters we interacted with were open, friendly, and extremely cooperative in helping us understand the complex operations of the College Station Fire Department. In addition, we were extremely impressed with the level of dedication many firefighters exhibited during our time spent with them.

It is our opinion that the reason the firefighters were so responsive is because they have a true desire to improve the operations of the Fire Department. However, some of the perceptions of firefighters appear to conflict with our observations. In addition, solutions given by firefighters tend to focus on those that would require significant increases to the Fire Department's budget.